

PSC Consumer Connection



Informed Consumers, Quality Utility Services, and a Dedicated Organization for Missourians in the 21st Century

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Public Information & Education Department

PSC Seeks Customer Comment on Utility Company Preparation and Restoration Efforts from July Storms

The Public Service Commission will hold local public hearings in October to gather information from affected customers on several issues including:

1. How long power was out in their residence.
2. Customer's ability to make contact with utilities and the responsiveness of the utilities when contacted.
3. Opinions on whether action by utilities could have prevented the power outage or lessened the damage caused by the storm.

The hearing schedule is as follows:

Tuesday, October 3 - St. Louis

Information Session 5:30 pm

Hearing 6:00 pm

Hazelwood East School Auditorium

11300 Dunn Road

Wednesday, October 4 - St. Louis

Information Session 11:30 am

Hearing 12:00 pm

St. Louis County Library

Thornhill Branch Auditorium

12863 Willowick Drive

Wednesday, October 4 - St. Louis

Information Session 5:30 pm

Hearing 6:00 pm

Wohl Community Center Auditorium

1515 N. Kingshighway

Thursday, October 5 - Farmington

Information Session 11:30 am

Hearing 12:00 pm

Farmington City Hall

Long Memorial Hall Auditorium

110 W. Columbia

Thursday, October 5 - Potosi

Information Session 5:30 pm

Hearing 6:00 pm

Potosi School

Trojan Intermediate School Cafeteria

367 Intermediate Drive

Budget Billing -- Is it right for you?

Essentially, budget billing is an "optional" payment program that allows you to pay the same amount each month for your electricity or natural gas usage throughout the entire year. This monthly bill is typically based upon your usage the previous 12 months. **The types of budget billing plans administered by each company may vary. Contact your local utility provider for details.**

What are the advantages of budget billing?

Budget billing gives you more certainty about what your electric or natural gas bill will be each month. Instead of paying high natural gas bills in the winter or high electric bills in the summer, you pay relatively the same amount all year. In low usage months, you will pay more than your actual bill. Likewise, when usage is high, your budget bill amount will be lower than your actual bill.

How is the budget bill amount calculated?

Your energy company estimates your payment based on your previous year's consumption.

What factors can cause a change in my payment?

Weather. Warmer or colder than normal temperatures will impact the amount of electricity or natural gas you use. If you improve the energy efficiency of your home, your usage will be lower than expected. For example, you can improve home energy efficiency when you replace an old air conditioner, insulate your attic or seal air leaks. A change in the cost of electricity or natural gas or your monthly usage can also affect your payment.

Can my budget billing amount be adjusted during the year?

Yes. Your budget billing payment is reviewed periodically by your utility provider to avoid significant overpayment or underpayment. Your actual usage and rates, compared to the utility's estimated budget amount, may cause your budget plan payment to go up or down.

How do I sign up for budget billing?

Contact your utility provider for information to see what type of plans they offer. In most cases, the only requirement is that you pay your bill on time. Customers may choose to leave "budget billing" at any time.

Cold Weather Rule Changes

The Missouri Public Service Commission has adopted a number of permanent changes to its Cold Weather Rule to assist Missouri natural gas customers faced with high heating bills. The Cold Weather Rule establishes requirements for providing utility service during the heating season.

The Cold Weather Rule is designed to help customers with heat-related bills from November 1 through March 31 of each year. It has been a part of the Commission's rules and regulations since 1977.

The new provisions incorporate many of the changes made on an emergency basis last December.

Rule changes include:

- More lenient payment terms permitting reconnection of service for those natural gas customers who defaulted on a previous Cold Weather Rule payment agreement. A customer can have service restored by making an initial payment of 50% of his/her outstanding balance or \$500, whichever is less, with the deferred balance to be paid in a Cold Weather Rule payment agreement plan. In the past, a utility company could require up to 80% of the outstanding balance. The term of the payment plan will be 12 months unless the customer requests a shorter period or the utility agrees to a longer period.
- A gas utility will not be required to offer the more lenient payment terms to keep service on or to reconnect a customer under the new provisions of the rule more than once every two years for any customer who has defaulted on a Cold Weather Rule payment plan under this section three or more times. In those situations, customers would be required to pay 80% of the outstanding balance to keep service or to have service restored.
- If a customer complies with his/her Cold Weather Rule payment plan, the company must defer late payment and interest charges.
- Immediate enrollment in a budget billing plan for any customer, including those who may have arrears.
- Any customer entering into a Cold Weather Rule payment plan, who complies with the terms of the plan, will be treated, on a forward going basis, as a customer who has never defaulted on a Cold Weather Rule payment plan.
- Any customer calling the natural gas company and indicating that he/she is having difficulty paying his/her bill, will be informed of all of his/her options.
- Natural gas companies would be allowed to collect reasonable costs associated with complying with the rule.

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In addition to the permanent changes listed above, the Cold Weather Rule also:

- Prohibits the disconnection of heat-related service when the temperature is predicted to drop below 32 degrees during the following 24 hour period.
- Prohibits the disconnection of service for registered elderly and disabled customers who meet certain income guidelines and who make a minimum payment.
- Prohibits the assessment of a new deposit or bill deposits that were previously assessed for customers who enter into a Cold Weather Rule payment agreement and the payment agreement is kept.
- Ensures that customers are given adequate notification of a proposed discontinuance of service.

Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program

The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) is a federally-funded program to help eligible low income households meet their home **heating** and/or **cooling** needs.

The availability of LIHEAP assistance is not guaranteed. Applications are accepted in Community Action Agency offices throughout Missouri starting in October or visit:

www.dss.mo.gov/fsd/liheap.htm

There are 19 Missouri Community Action Agencies located throughout the state. Each agency has specific service regions. To find an agency that represents your county, please call 573-634-2969 or visit:

www.communityaction.org/CAAServiceAreas.htm

For printed materials regarding a number of consumer issues or copies of this newsletter, please call 573-751-7491 or email joyce.neuner@psc.mo.gov

Who to Contact: Missouri Public Service Commission
Consumer Hotline **1-800-392-4211**

or email: pscinfo@psc.mo.gov

Mail your inquiry or complaint to:
Missouri Public Service Commission
Consumer Services Department
P.O. Box 360
Jefferson City, MO 65102

